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THE STUDY OF FRENCH IN THE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS OF THE UNITED STATES

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The two questions at issue are: Is it possible to teach French—I mean conversational French—in the public high schools? Admitting it to be possible, is it advisable?

It seems now fully demonstrated that the public high school has become the university of the middle class, for statistics prove that scarcely 4 per cent of the public high-school students, after graduation, enter the universities or colleges. Therefore the large majority of the students who pass through the public high schools come out of the middle class, and seem satisfied with the elementary education they receive in that public institution. They consider themselves sufficiently prepared for the battle of life. In my judgment, they ought to be, provided they avail themselves of the multiple advantages so generously offered them by modern popular education.

Now, the question arises: Who is the person best qualified to teach conversational French? It seems rational to say that French nationality, backed by education and experience, is the absolute requisite for any person who claims to teach French. A German, an American, a Japanese may have mastered the French language to some extent, but, with few exceptions, the standard of his pronunciation will be always below that of any native Frenchman.

The next question is: Is French taught in the public high schools by native teachers? To answer that question, I shall take the city of Chicago as an illustration.

There are 23 teachers of French scattered in the 21 public high schools of the city of Chicago. Out of these 23 teachers 4 are French born, and may consequently be considered capable of imparting French pronunciation to their pupils. The other 19 are either American, German, Irish, or of any nationality except French. Some of them may speak French, but none of them is

willing to boast of it. They use their French with wise discretion and creditable modesty, and rather depend on their grammar and lexicons to make up for their deficiency.

For the use of those teachers, the authors of the books placed in their hands have, with the assistance of the ever-obliging publishers, imagined a certain figurative pronunciation, a sort of phonetic code, spelled in hieroglyphic signs, placed next to each French word in the vocabulary. This is intended to imitate French sounds and inflections. To me, this sounds more like Chinese, although, I must confess, I have a very imperfect knowledge of that language. To the French-born teacher, this grotesque arrangement is an object of horror, as it hinders him seriously in his work because of its irresistible attraction for the majority of his pupils who, in spite of repeated warnings, are bound to resort to it outside of the classroom. Moreover, it has the disastrous effect of creating in the mind of the students such confusion that it becomes impossible for them to spell a French word correctly. By means of this scientific device, those teachers are expected to inculcate in their students the fundamental principles of the language of Molière and Victor Hugo!

Out of the five French-born teachers referred to above, four have passed the fifty mark some years ago, which means that their teaching days are numbered. When they drop out of active service, they will be replaced by substitutes, until the whole French teaching body is in the grip of the mysterious code of imitative pronunciation.

Such are the present conditions of French teaching in the public high schools of Chicago, and Chicago may well congratulate itself, for there is not another city in the West that can boast of so many native French teachers in its public high schools. I took this one city only as an example. *Ab una disce omnes.*

Therefore it appears evident that the time is not far distant when the study of French in 90 per cent of the high schools in the United States will be on the same footing with Latin and Greek. This must come to pass.

This state of thing is due to the fact that the small number of French people who emigrate into this country stop in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and the larger cities of the East, and settle

there. A few venture to the Middle West, none to the far West. In fact the French are poor colonists; they rarely desert their native land. The number of French people living in Chicago is very limited; they belong, mostly, to the working class, and are, as a rule, thrifty and law-abiding. Some of them excel in the culinary art where their services are highly appreciated and amazingly compensated. In comparison, the native French teachers make a poor showing.

It is now evident that the teaching of the French language in the American public high schools, so far as the speaking of it is concerned, is impracticable, utterly impossible, absolutely hopeless. It is a dream, and should be sent back to dreamland, where it belongs. The days of the French-born teachers are nearly over; none will come to succeed them, and, after all, it is just as well, as their deficiency in English pronunciation and ignorance of the American temperament make them utterly unfit for good discipline.

A few years ago I had the good fortune to judge of the merit of the French taught in the Denver public high schools. A girl was introduced to me who had graduated a few months before, and was on her way to Smith College. I profess the highest respect for the Denver high schools and do not mean in the least to speak in disparagement of them, but, to be polite, I must say that the French spoken by that Denver girl was rather picturesque. Decidedly, the Denver brand did not compare favorably with the Chicago article!

I can fairly imagine how she was received by the sophisticated French professors of the aristocratic eastern institution. For the last ten or fifteen years a small number of graduates from certain Chicago high schools have been welcomed by the Smith French professors, but the supply is limited, and will soon be exhausted. Real French speaking will become a thing of the past in the public high schools. French will figure only as an ornament in the official curriculum. Within ten years, it will be classed among the dead languages. A few faithful lovers of the French language will find an everlasting consolation in the phonograph, the always handy professor with the genuine Parisian twang.

The second question now arises: Is conversational French in the public high schools advisable? For this question I shall again take Chicago as an illustration.

What are the means by which a student can keep in constant touch with a certain subject for an indefinite period after leaving the high school? I know of only two: either by conversing, speaking, attending lectures, participating in conversations and debates, or by reading and writing.

Out of the two thousand pupils who graduate every year from the Chicago public high schools, 97 per cent belong to the middle and the working classes, people in various stations in life, some in good circumstances, some struggling for a livelihood, some poor. The other 3 per cent are the wealthy, those who move in high society, travel, go abroad, tour around the world, thus keeping up, improving, and completing their education through the ever-changing scenes and spectacles displayed before them.

The 97 per cent who compose the large majority will, shortly after leaving school, scatter in every direction, entering various careers and professions. A great number take a course at some business college, which opens for them a large field in the commercial world.

Now, is this great mass of former French students liable ever to practice the study of French in its conversational form? Will they move in society where French is spoken? Can they afford French professors, tutors, or companions? Will they go to France to practice their French? Will they find in this or other cities occasions to practice it, or attend meetings, lectures, or plays in French? In short, is there any chance, any probability, of their finding a practical use or application of the French they have learned to speak in the public high schools?

No, the frail sentences they had at their command will soon vanish for lack of practice, and a year after leaving school, no trace, no vestige of them will be left. I do not hesitate to say that hundreds, nay, thousands of former French students stand ready to bear out my statement. They are now sorry for the many weeks and months they were unconsciously and foolishly made to waste in phonetics, in superhuman efforts to acquire a pronunciation for which they have no use, to the detriment of a thorough training in grammar which would now enable them to apply their study of French to some practical use, that is, to reading the French language either in the fields of science, commerce, and industry, or in the

realm of literature, from the great French classics to the *roman en vogue* of the present day.

It is no use trying to combine conversational and grammatical French in a class of forty pupils, especially if, in compliance with certain orders, French must be the exclusive language of the classroom at the very start, and the use of English strictly prohibited. The session opens with the inevitable drill in phonetics, then the wave of painful and laborious questions and answers is fairly under way when the bell rings and the 47-minute session is over, and the grammar is left in the cold—I mean in the desk. But I must say most of the pupils are strongly in favor of that method; it naturally appeals to them; for it nearly does away with the grammar, and young people hate grammar, as proved by their blatant deficiency in English.

An attempt to teach both grammatical and conversational French in a large class, and teach both correctly and thoroughly, is a fruitless attempt; one must be detrimental to the other; the intellectual element is too heterogeneous or refractory; the general spirit lacks congeniality, harmony, and uniformity. The popularity of that teaching under such conditions is based exclusively on its groundless reputation and deceitful attractiveness.

In the public high schools of France, English is taught according to that method, and with great success. Teachers are not allowed to use French in the classroom. In Paris, as in almost all the large cities of France, English is spoken in every shop, café, restaurant, theater, and public building. In Paris alone, there is an English-speaking population of one hundred and fifty thousand persons, and one can make the trip from Paris to London in six hours. In Chicago, the French-speaking population is limited to about three hundred, and it takes at least ten days to cover the four thousand miles that separate the metropolis of the West from the capital of France.

I have been told that there is more German spoken in Chicago than in Berlin. I suppose this refers to the quantity. It shows that, in order to practice the study of German, a pupil has only to go out of his home and talk German to the first person he meets. If he fails in his attempt, he is sure to be successful in a second encounter.

It is easy to understand that French speaking is successfully taught in private schools, where classes are very small, and pupils are paying a good price for what is considered a social accomplishment. The high school is a public, and, therefore, a democratic institution, from which "fads" ought to be "kicked out," to use the rather emphatic expression of a prominent member of the Chicago Board of Education. When pupils take up the study of Latin and Greek in the public high schools, they do not do so with the expectation of ever using those languages in their daily life, whether it be in Chicago, Denver, or San Francisco. Those languages are taught with a view to training the mind, impressing their relation with the English language, and explaining the etymology of most of the words applied to sciences and modern inventions.

Sad though it be, 97 per cent of the students of French in the public high schools will make no more use of French in their daily life than they will of Latin and Greek, so far as speaking French is concerned, owing to the deplorable fact that they will never be able to put it into practice and will naturally and unquestionably forget it. Therefore, conversational French in the public high schools should be classed among the "fads." A truly democratic educational system is founded on practical, rational, and permanent instruction rather than short-lived social accomplishments.

A French-born teacher would find much more satisfaction in the adaptation of the method employed in private schools to the large classes which confront him in the high schools, were this adaptation a possibility. The immediate results are gratifying, and apparently convincing. On a visitor it has an astounding effect, especially if the visitor has only a slight smattering of French. He will follow the proceedings with intense interest; he will be amused by the eagerness of the students to answer questions; he will be favorably impressed with the cheerful atmosphere of the classroom; he will enjoy the show; he will find no words to express his admiration for the teacher and his method. And if he is, perchance, a man of standing and influence, he will occasionally say a good word for that teacher: it may help his promotion.

On the other hand, grammar is a dry subject. Syntax contains no poetry. Idioms are not conducive to humor. On a visitor

the impression will be oppressively tiresome, especially if he happens to be a former "flunker" in English. He will soon yawn distressingly, and furtively sneak away from the room, carrying with him a most pitiable opinion of the teacher and his *modus docendi*.

If, on the contrary, he has mastered his own language, if he finds intellectual enjoyment in comparative philology, he will follow with interest the vivid demonstrations on the blackboard and the lively and instructive discussions they arouse among the students, the Latin quotations and the etymological study derived therefrom, the careful analysis of every part of speech, the logical construction of every sentence—in short, all that helps train the mind and enables the student to acquire a perfect and permanent understanding of a modern language of high standard.

It goes without saying that after one year of a thorough grammatical training, French could easily be the language of the classroom the second year, providing the teacher in charge happened to speak French, which is seldom the case.

However modern a language may be, it will fall into desuetude in countries where its use is occasional, and eventually become discarded. All the good-will and heroic efforts of a handful of teachers to keep it alive will prove powerless, and their laudable ambition will have to yield to the inevitable.

The exclusive private schools and fashionable colleges will remain the final home of conversational French in this country, while the democratic public schools, both elementary and high, will keep on being the educational melting-pot for children of all races, colors, and conditions, where German is an established necessity and French an unknown luxury.

But, in spite of the regrettable fact that, for reasons explained above, French is so rarely spoken in the United States, France stands among the leading nations of the world, and the French language is one of the most popular and instructive living languages.

That French literature is appreciated and enjoyed in the city of Chicago is evidenced by the fact that nine thousand persons, mostly students or former students, applied for French books at the public library alone during the year 1912. Those nine thousand people were either unable to speak French or to find anyone with

whom to speak French, but they found in the public library the key to matchless treasures in every line of trade, industry, science, art, and letters.

As a matter of observation, at the beginning of every term, I always make it a point to inquire from a few among the large number of beginners what their object and purpose were in choosing French from the list of studies. Their answers do not vary materially. It happened that "French fitted their program," or they heard that French was "cute," or they were told French was a "cinch." After a week or so, however, a good many realize that French is far from being a "cinch," in spite of its probable "cuteness," and they hurriedly drop it, and replace it by whatever presents itself. On being asked whether their parents had been instrumental in their selection of French, those pupils, unhesitatingly, answer that their parents never interfered, never bothered with their children's course of studies, and that they were at liberty to choose whatever they pleased.

Were the parents interviewed on the subject, the mother would say she highly approves her daughter's selection of French on the ground that the family may some day take a trip to Paris, where the girl would be of priceless assistance in getting information from the chauffeurs, and in translating the various menus in the restaurants. The father flatly refuses to be interviewed.

This is all one can gather about their conception of the practical use of a foreign language. This seems to be the full extent of their interpretation of intellectual culture.

I have no authority to discuss here the momentous problem of elementary education. I may be allowed, however, to venture the opinion that so long as parents display such gross ignorance and criminal indifference toward their children's education, there will be no hope for improvement in this lamentable state of affairs.

It may easily be predicted that a perfect *entente* and intelligent co-operation between parents and teachers would result in wonderful changes. From such a collaboration would rise a new generation whose standard in scholarship and achievement in ethics and morals would form a wholesome contrast with the now-existing conditions.